

## Hall County Sheriff Deputies Respond to Gulf Disaster

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When Hurricane Katrina hit, it really didn't sink in, it seemed like just another hurricane that hits the gulf this time of year. Last year there were four that hit Florida alone (Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne); nonetheless, we become desensitized to hearing about it, much the same as we do with our springtime thunderstorms. It wasn't until a couple of days after Katrina's landfall that the true scale of the impact and devastation of the storm became readily apparent. Having been in New Orleans last January, I could only imagine what it was truly like now.

Chris Rea, HCSO Chief Deputy, approached me with the idea of his going down to assist with clean up efforts. He advised that he had made several friends from the New Orleans area while attending the National FBI academy in the fall of 2002. Chris explained that he had made several attempts to get in touch with his law enforcement friends to no avail. After we discussed it, I advised that I felt it real important that we do what we can to assist. I informed Chris that if he chose to go, he would remain on paid status while he was there. I then asked our evidence technician, Doug Kruse if he too would be interested in making the trip. Doug didn't hesitate, his response was, "Yes, I would really like the opportunity to go."

What both men had in common, besides their background, was the size of their hearts. I can't think of anyone I would like to have show up in the event of a disaster than these two.

After more discussion and a few phone calls, we were able to locate a 2004 Dodge Ram pickup that Roy's Grand Dodge was willing to let us borrow for the trip. Wal-Mart agreed to donate some items, our local Sheriff's office Union voted to provide money to cover the fuel for the trip, and also the Grand Island Police Department Union opted to donate cash. Other individuals donated cash as well for the victims. People also loaned pressure washers, generators, and chainsaws to Chris and Doug to use while there.



Chief Deputy Rea and Louisiana Troopers with Dodge Ram donated by Roy's Grand Dodge



Chief Deputy Rea and Lt. Cooke

Chris was finally able to get in touch with one of his fellow grads, named Richard Cooke who was a Lt. with the Louisiana State Police. Chris advised Lt. Cooke of his intentions and Lt. Cooke immediately began lining up first responders who had been victimized. The focus was to be commissioned by the L.S.P. and to target homes of first responders, who were working 12 hour shifts, with only one day a week off. Lt. Cooke also started lining up specific homes so Chris and Doug could make the most of their time while there.

The list was completed even before leaving Nebraska, Chris was also able to obtain a needs list for a couple of specific families before departing. He and his wife Deb took some of the donated cash and bought clothing of specific sizes and other household items, these families were in dire need of.

Chief Deputy Rea also contacted Sgt. Ron Ruple of the Mandeville Police Department. Sgt. Ruple had also attended the FBI National Academy with Lt. Cooke and Chief Deputy Rea. Sgt. Ruple advised that he had two officers that had completely lost their homes to Katrina. The Grand Island Police Department FOP provided \$1000 to be divided between the two Officers. This donation will go a long way in helping these two rebuild what they have lost.



Chief Deputy Rea, Sgt. Ron Ruple and Officer Watson of the Mandeville Police Department



Residence of Officer Watson

On September 20th, 2005, Chris and Doug left Grand Island. While in route, they were aware another hurricane, Rita, was in the gulf with no determination of exact landfall determined. New Orleans was on the eastern most part of the hurricane watch and a possible target again. Chris and Doug had to make a decision on their second day and decided to drive on into Louisiana.

They arrived in Mandeville, LA., north side on Lake Ponchartrain, and made contact with Richard. They actually got a good days work in before the rain bands of Rita arrived. On the second day it was raining too hard, tornado warnings and flooding were also an issue.



Storm damage in Mandeville, Louisiana

The day was spent riding with LSP and checking out problems that were called in. At one point I called Chris on his cell phone and he advised he was riding on the levy with a trooper, checking for possible breaches that had been reported. Needless to say, I became very concerned, telling him to be very careful.

After Rita moved through the area, Chris and Doug began the task at hand. They worked on five different homes. Chris advised that the sights, sounds and smells were like nothing he had ever experienced in his life. All of the homes they worked on had been submerged with the storm surge.



Storm damage in Slidell, Louisiana

Some homes had only four feet of water move through them, others had much more. Regardless because of contaminants in the water, nothing was salvageable. Everything inside the home had to be removed and piled outside. This was inclusive of the sheetrock and carpet. All appliances, clothing and to sum it all up, every worldly possession the homeowners had were destroyed.



Chief Deputy Rea, Trooper Dangerfield and Doug Kruse in Slidell, Louisiana



Residence of Trooper Dangerfield in Slidell, Louisiana

Chris advised he was with one of the troopers victimized by Katrina when he was first able to see the damage to his personal residence. He advised it was a day he will never forget. Despite all of the damage and personal loss, both Chris and Doug advised, the victims were always focused on the next victim who had it just a little worse than they did.

Chris and Doug stayed in the Mandeville area for almost two weeks before heading for home. There were no breaks, they worked every day and the people they were helping, took very good care of the two, with good food and friendship.

I visited with Chris on his cell on October 2nd, upon his arrival in St. Louis. He advised that words could not possibly express what he had experienced. He stated that both Doug and he were exhausted and they were going to rest up at Chris' parent's house a day before heading back to Grand Island.

On Monday October 3rd I received a phone call in my office from Mandeville, LA. The male on the other end identified himself as George. I could tell by his southern drawl that he was in fact from the area. George wanted to thank me and everyone else for sending Chris and Doug to help. My conversation went on for more than 20 minutes with George and I couldn't begin to count the times he said "God bless you all, God love Chris and Doug and everyone."



Chief Deputy Rea, George Green Louisiana State Patrol mechanic and Doug Kruse

I recall him telling me that from the time Chris and Doug stepped out of the truck, the two worked without stopping. He compared the two's work ethic as "Doing the work of twenty men." I thanked George for taking care of both of them and wished him well. I finally had to tell George I had to go as it was obvious that he had no intention of hanging up the phone. His feeling of endless gratitude was well expressed by his phone call.

I talked with Chris by phone later this same date. He advised George was the mechanic who worked for LSP. George lost his home, completely to the wind and water of Katrina. He had just begun work for the LSP as a mechanic and he had also lost every tool he had ever owned. The only belongings this man had was the clothing on his back. To make things worse, he had lost his wife approximately a year previous. George was sleeping on a cot, in the garage of the LSP, working feverishly every day to keep the vehicles going for the State Police. Never would he murmur a complaint. Chris advised that we were able to help George with cash and a few tools we had taken down for donation. After receiving the gifts, George could not thank them enough. Chris and Doug both stated that you couldn't have found a nicer man on the planet.

We all are but an accumulation of our own experiences as we travel through life. There is no doubt in my mind that today Chris and Doug are much richer than most from their Mandeville experiences. Just the same I believe that the friendships created by their efforts brought richness to those who were in need, and I'm grateful we in some way could help. I know if we as a community are ever in need, someone will be there for us.

- Sheriff Jerry Watson